

1  
H884N

# The Negro in American Agriculture





## Historic, archived document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

# Foreword

THIS brief report of the services carried on by the Department of Agriculture and cooperating agencies of Government has been prepared for the further information of persons who view the Government exhibit at the American Negro Exposition, Chicago, July 1-September 1, 1940.

As this report points out, Negro farm families carry a large share of the burden of producing the annual output of farm products in the 13 Southern States. Negro farm families have in their keeping millions of acres of the Nation's basic resource in the soils of the South.

To enable farm families to serve the whole people by producing the needed abundance and conserving the soil, and to help them achieve in exchange an increasingly better standard of living, the whole people have made available a wide range of Government services. These services are at the command of all who wish to use them. The extent of these services has been greatly increased during the past seven years in response to the need of the farm people. Negro farm families have made increasing use of both the older established services and of the newer ones. It is our hope that the Government exhibit at this exposition and this brief report will speed up the use of these services by Negro farmers to the benefit of their own and the national welfare.

*H a w a l l a c e*

*Secretary of Agriculture.*



# The Negro In American Agriculture

## I

### Struggle and Attainment

AGRICULTURE means more to more American Negroes than does any other industry or occupation.

More Negroes are earning their living from the land today than in any other way.

Farming is a way of life for half of all Negroes in the United States.

More than 75 percent of the American Negroes live in the South. Ninety-five percent of the Negro farm operators live in the South. Nearly half of all the southern sharecroppers are Negroes.

The welfare of most Negroes in the South rises and falls with the welfare of southern agriculture.

The status of the Negro farmer is one of the major factors in the southern agricultural situation. It is of vital interest, not only to the South but to the entire nation.

The Negro has shared with the white man from earliest Colonial days the burdens and the rewards that have gone with the building of civilization on this continent.

Under slavery for 244 years, a free race only within the memory of some still living, Negroes by their toil in cotton and tobacco fields alone have added billions of dollars to the national wealth.

#### NEGRO TRADITIONS ROOTED IN THE LAND

Until the Civil War, practically all the Negroes in this country lived on the land, where they did nearly all the work that was done in the fields and, as they toiled, built around themselves a folk lore rich in song and lyrics that has attracted world-wide attention.

Through the dark years of the War Between the States and the period of the reconstruction down to 1914, the interests of American Negroes were to a great extent bound up with the agricultural development of the South. Even today, 20 years after the great migration from the cotton fields to the industrial centers of the North and East, the historic homeland of the American Negro remains the most important theater of his struggles.

The present ills of southern agriculture, which bear so heavily on the Negro, stem largely from the land system which developed after the Civil War. The collapse of the slave economy created serious problems both for the land owners and the new class of freed men. Plantation owners had an abundance of land, but no labor and no capital. The former slaves had the capacity to work, but no security on the land, no training in management, and no means of support. In the wake of reconstruction grew up the familiar tenant and sharecropper approach to the problem.

The ever-present threat of poverty and debt drove land owners and tenants into fuller subjection to cotton as the one source of cash income.

### HOW DEPRESSION HIT THE COTTON BELT

As might have been expected, the first World War and the agricultural depression which followed, and finally, the general depression, exposed the essential weaknesses of the cotton economy. Wide fluctuations in price, chaos in the foreign market, appearance of new areas of cotton culture in other lands, development of substitute fabrics, the march of machine methods, all added to the difficulties of southern farmers.

Hundreds of thousands of Negroes left the cottonfields during the 1920's to find work in northern industries as the inflation era advanced. They were engulfed together with their white coworkers in the depression that followed the crash of 1929.

The story of the Negro in agriculture forms a challenging chapter in the story of farming in America, a tale of impressive achievements and of great misery and need, a tale of a folk group that in a brief 75 years has covered a distance many other racial groups have taken centuries to travel, a record that holds promise of greater achievements in the future.

### PROGRESS IN OWNERSHIP OF LAND

The long, difficult transition from the status of slave to sharecropper, and to that of independent, self-reliant, farm renters and farm owners was effected to a much larger degree than is commonly recognized.

In 1930, on the threshold of the depression, there were more than 800,000 Negro farm operators in the United States, 95 percent of them in the South. Of this number nearly 200,000 owned their own farms. They held title to more than 11 million acres of land.

The most rapid advancement by the Negro race has taken place since the turn of the present century. The accomplishments of this period are the result of the vision of the outstanding Negro and white leaders and of the cooperation of many agencies, public and private, that worked with Negroes and helped them in their struggle for progress.

Early in the present century Negro and white land-grant colleges and the United States Department of Agriculture became centers for a new trend in rural education—a trend directed toward assisting both Negroes and white to make the most out of their life on the land.

Better methods of farming, more attention to good diet, health, and sanitation, new incentives to combat social and economic stagnation—these were ideals that captured the imagination of rural leaders fired with enthusiasm for the task of helping to bring about better living conditions on the land.

The Department of Agriculture and the State experiment stations had long been the source of new knowledge of better crop varieties, better strains of livestock, and better methods of production.

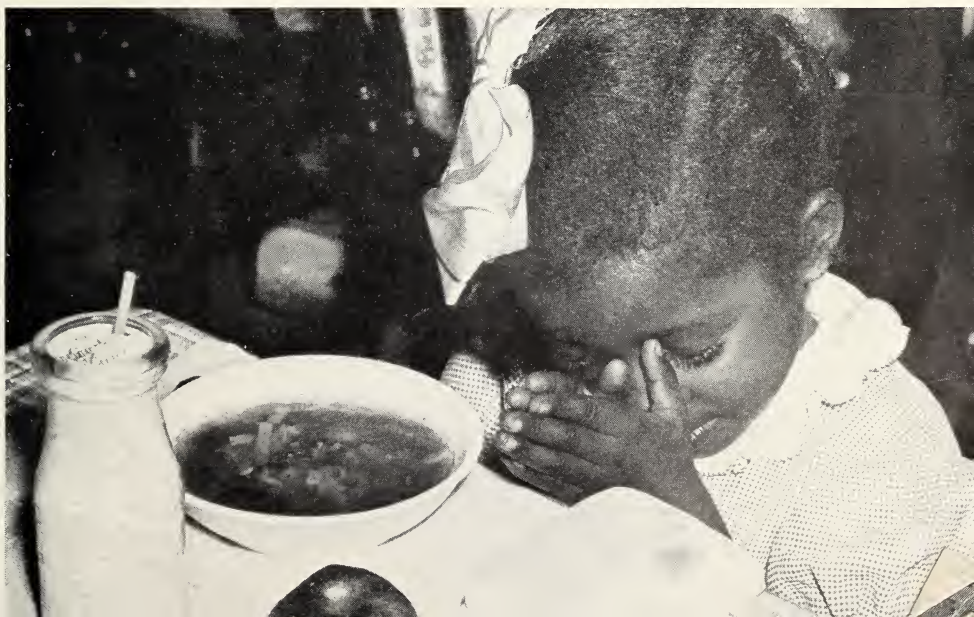
With the development of the Extension Service, conducted jointly by the United States Department of Agriculture and the land-grant colleges, the information developed by scientific research was made locally available to all farm families. It came to play an important role in all phases of southern farm life.

In farming communities, the county agent, symbol of the whole movement, became the confidant, guide, and counselor of rural families in their aspirations for higher standards of living.

#### NEGROES DEVELOP OWN LEADERS

Among the Negro colleges, Tuskegee and Hampton Institutes provided outstanding leadership.

There are today more than 500 Negro county agents. They form a far-flung line of public servants, bringing into remote farming communities the best and latest methods of agriculture and taking back to urban communities the needs and the point of view of the farmers.







The demonstration farm, testing and exhibiting in actual practice the latest methods of crop production, soil improvement, diversification, livestock and poultry experiments, appealed to Negroes even more than the bulletins and lectures of the agricultural specialists.

Home-economics workers in farming communities popularized new techniques for cooking, canning, housekeeping, and gardening. Boys' and girls' clubs followed with their own special programs for assisting rural youths to train themselves for more effective leadership and better living.

This, in brief, was the development in southern agriculture as it affected Negro farm families during the generation preceding the depression.



# The Negro and the Farm Program

THE depression which followed the crash of 1929 brought to the Nation's attention as never before the plight of farmers.

It brought understanding of the interdependence of farm and city and the realization that the Nation cannot function as a whole if important parts are stalled or crippled.

The blow of the depression fell heavily upon citizens of all occupations—Negro and white alike.

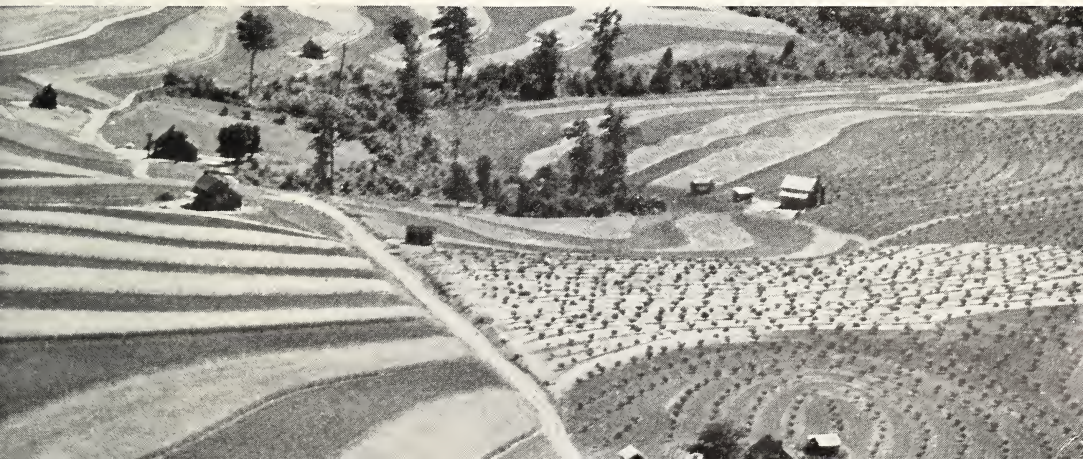
Under the programs directed by the farm legislation which Congress began to enact in 1933, farmers received immediate assistance in meeting their most serious problems.

This assistance included immediate relief in cases of actual want; opportunity for work; emergency steps to raise farm income, conserve the soil, ease the debt load, and retard the drift toward greater tenancy—such were the broad objectives.

The measure of the distance Negroes have traveled since 1865 is seen in the fact that in the whole program for recovery from home relief in the depression-stricken cities of the North to the AAA farm program on the smallest cotton farm in the South they have drawn upon Government assistance as human beings, American citizens, and not as a special problem group.

## TAKING PART IN COMMUNITY AND NATIONAL LIFE

During the last decade the national farm programs have brought the great body of Negro farmers into community and national life on a broad



scale. Through his local, regional, and State civic-betterment committees, organized by the Negro Extension Service leaders, the Negro is taking part in many important movements to raise the cultural levels of his people throughout the South.

In authorizing the Agricultural Adjustment and Conservation Program, Congress took the view that the farm problem is the problem of people living and working on the land, regardless of race, color, or creed. The interests of all farmers are inseparable. The whole farm group prospers or suffers together.

The conservation and adjustment program makes it possible for tenant farmers, once tied to the single cash-crop system, to withdraw enough land from cotton and tobacco to grow food and feed crops for their families and livestock. At the same time the measures taken to adjust production and bring supplies more nearly in line with needs together with crop loans, marketing programs, and the farm program payments, greatly increased cash farm income. Both through increased cash income and the increased home production of food supplies, the farm program has enabled farm families to improve their standard of living.

#### SOIL EROSION A SERIOUS PROBLEM

One of the most serious problems with which agriculture has had to deal has been the loss of soil through erosion and declining fertility of cropland. This problem has been particularly difficult in the South where the land has been farmed intensively, much of it in cotton which exposes the soil to washing.

One way in which the farm program helps farmers reduce soil losses is the provision for shifting land out of soil-depleting crops and into crops that protect and improve the soil. An important part of the conservation effort in the farm program is the research to develop better methods of saving and improving the soil and the demonstration work to show how these methods are used. Thousands of individual farmers have 5-year agreements with the Department of Agriculture which provide for complete farm plans for erosion control and good land management. Under these agreements, the Department may furnish labor and materials and heavy equipment such as terracing machinery. All farmers who cooperate in the farm program can earn conservation payments which help to meet the cash cost of soil improvement work.

The system of Federal credit for farmers has helped to increase net income of farmers by helping to reduce the cost of carrying loans. This system has helped thousands to purchase farms and refinance existing debt. It has helped to provide adequate credit for seasonal farm operations.

The Federal Land Bank mortgage loans are made through associations

owned and controlled by farmers. In many cases, Negroes have formed their own associations. Short-term loans are provided through production credit associations. In the Southern States from 20 to 50 percent of the membership of many production credit associations is made up of Negro farmers.

#### ASSISTANCE FOR TENANTS AND SHARECROPPERS

The financial plight of sharecroppers and tenant farmers is being dealt with systematically. Through the Farm Program long-term rehabilitation loans are available to enable destitute farm families to again become self-supporting. Along with these loans goes assistance in developing farm plans that will provide both cash income, food for the family, and feed for livestock. Loans are also available to enable eligible tenants, sharecroppers, or farm laborers to obtain land of their own.

Hundreds of farm families have been assisted in moving from desolate stretches of submarginal land and settling on model "homestead projects." In January 1940, 1,800 Negro families were living on 31 such projects in 13 Southern States. Families on these projects are provided with adequate land to farm or garden, comfortable houses at low rent, barns, and outbuildings. Cooperative stores, gins, and marketing services are being established.

Last year a survey of 116,000 typical southern rehabilitation families, including some 50,000 Negroes, showed that they had increased their average net worth from \$451 per family to \$752. This was an average increase of \$300 or 66 percent. Their total gain in net worth was \$35,000,000.

#### ELECTRICITY ON THE FARM

Throughout the country the farm program is making it possible for more and more farm families to enjoy the comfort and convenience of electricity through loans to establish rural service lines. In thousands of Negro farm homes not only electric lighting but also electric irons, radios, fans, and washing machines are helping to bring about better living conditions on the land. Some dairymen are cooling their milk by electric refrigeration.

To encourage the use of electricity in the smaller farmhouses the Department of Agriculture this spring offered to install power lines in any home







not more than 1,000 feet removed from one of its trunk lines for a down payment of \$2, and to supply a special package of electrical appliances, including a radio, an iron, and lighting fixtures, to be paid for in small monthly installments. For a two-room house, the monthly installments are \$1.81, including the charge for electricity, for 2 years and then only \$1 a month for the service. In the case of a one-room cabin, the installments run for only 18 months.

#### SURPLUS FOOD AND COTTON FOR THE NEEDY

One of the important measures undertaken through the farm program to improve farm income has been the removal of farm surpluses. The surplus-removal programs are meeting the urgent need for a method of putting the abundance of the farms to use among low-income families who need it most. Farmers and city people, Negro and white, benefit from the surplus-removal programs.

There are three general ways of doing this job. One is the direct purchase and distribution plan. The Department of Agriculture buys surplus food from the farmer and ships it to State welfare agencies which in turn distribute it to needy families from food depots. Anyone getting public assistance is eligible to participate in the benefits.

The food-stamp plan is another device for taking care of hungry people with surpluses from the farms. The stamp plan operates through established business channels. With every dollar's worth of food stamps purchased, eligible families are given 50 cents' worth of special stamps free, which are good only for foods certified as in surplus.

The school-lunch program provides a means of using farm surpluses to furnish free school lunches for undernourished children. Daily throughout the school terms rural and urban children, Negro and white, are benefited by this program.

#### HOME-MADE MATTRESS PROGRAM

Comfort as well as food has a part in the general program to utilize surplus farm products. One of the most recent developments is the cotton-

mattress program. Any farm family whose normal annual cash income is not in excess of \$400 is eligible to receive the materials for making a mattress—that is, 50 pounds of cotton and 10 yards of ticking. The Department of Agriculture furnishes the cotton and ticking. The Extension Service provides instruction on how to make the mattresses.

The cotton-stamp plan which operates like the food-stamp plan helps cotton producers by increasing consumption and helps low-income families to obtain needed cotton clothing and household articles which they would not otherwise be able to have.

In several large cities, thousands of low-income families are benefiting from the low-cost milk program made possible by price concessions of producers and distributors and by Federal funds.

The national farm program provides the means whereby all farmers can work together with the Government to bring about better living for all families on the land.

#### WHERE TO GET INFORMATION ON SERVICES FOR FARMERS

General information on agricultural production problems or home problems—see your county agent.

Agricultural Adjustment and Conservation Program—AAA committee or your county agent.

Rehabilitation loans—county rehabilitation supervisor for the Farm Security Administration.

Farm tenant loans—county rehabilitation supervisor for the Farm Security Administration.

Soil Conservation—see your county agent.

Rural Electrification loans—see your county agent or write to the Rural Electrification Administration, Washington, D. C.

Farm mortgage loans—see your county agent or your local National Farm Loan Association.

Short-term loans—see your county agent or your local Production Credit Association.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Washington, D. C.

July 1940

# Did You Know?

- that 4,500,000 Negroes are living on farms in 13 Southern States?  
•
- that Negro farmers constitute 12.6 percent of all American farm operators?  
•
- that 50,000 rehabilitation loans have been made to Negro farmers in the last four years?  
•
- that 987 loans were made to Negro farm tenants in the first two years the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act was in operation?  
•
- that 427 Negro families were farming on 10 rental co-operatives in January 1940?  
•
- that more than 1,800 Negro families are living today on farm homestead projects?  
•
- that more than 500 Negro county agents are serving farmers in the field?  
•
- that a 1939 survey of 50,000 Negro farm families shows their average net worth has increased from \$451 to \$752 since the inauguration of the rehabilitation program?